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ABSTRACT

Six adolescent refugees, ages 15-17, were interviewed regarding transition between Bosnia and upstate New York. All had been in the United States for 3-7 years, were enrolled in public school, and fluent in English. In 45 to 90 minute semi-structured interviews, there were a wide range of responses to the teens' common refugee experience. While those who had spent time in refugee camps reported feelings of loss upon leaving, travel to the United States was variously described as terrifying and as "like a vacation". Although all found entering school difficult and all reported school success, self-reported interaction with peers in the school setting ranged from isolation to full involvement. Interviewees also discussed family relationships, educational and vocational goals, household tasks, values, fears, hopes, and dreams for the future. Their responses revealed individual and familial differences in the process of acculturation and coming to terms with ethnic identity during a time of adolescent identity formation. Despite the small sample size preventing generalizations based upon demographic characteristics, results provide tentative insights into this specific refugee group, serve as a basis for further research, and elucidate the findings of previous researchers. (Contains 25 references.) (Author)

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Six Adolescents, Six Patterns: Bosnian Refugees in Upstate New York

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Six adolescent refugees, ages 15-17, were interviewed regarding transition between Bosnia and upstate New York. All (three girls/three boys) had been in the United States for 3-7 years, were enrolled in public school, and fluent in English. In 45 to 90 minute semi-structured interviews, there were a wide range of responses to the teens' common refugee experience. While those who had spent time in refugee camps reported feelings of loss upon leaving, travel to the United States was variously described as terrifying and as "like a vacation". Although all found entering school difficult and all reported school success, self-reported interaction with peers in the school setting ranged from isolation to full involvement. Interviewees also discussed family relationships, educational and vocational goals, household tasks, values, fears, hopes, and dreams for the future. Their responses revealed individual and familial differences in the process of acculturation and coming to terms with ethnic identity during a time of adolescent identity formation. Despite the small sample size preventing generalizations based upon demographic characteristics, results provide tentative insights into this specific refugee group, serve as a basis for further research, and elucidate the findings of previous researchers.

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Six Adolescents, Six Patterns: Bosnian Refugees in Upstate New York

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Current acculturation theory leaves many unanswered questions. Is acculturation a bimodal or multidimensional process?[2] Is it a linear process, a curvilinear one, or recursive? Does it occur in discrete stages or is it continuous? Is it domain-specific or does it occur across all cultural domains (e.g., language, socialization patterns, diet, etc.) at approximately the same pace? How does the process of acculturation interact with age/life-stage-related developmental processes such as overall identity development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia 1980) and cultural or ethnic identity development (e.g., Phinney, 2003)? Is the process of acculturation invariant or does it differ from person to person or group to group? If it differs (e.g Chun and Akutsu, 2003; Phinney and Devich-Navarro, 1997; Phinney, Ong, and Madden, 2000, and others) what are the relevant individual or group level variables and what is the influence of each?

Shifting focus from the newcomer to the host culture (Berry, 2003; Phinney, 2003), what aspects of the host culture affect acculturation patterns and in what way? Where there are interaction patterns among variables, what are they? Are there, for example, certain clusters of personality characteristics, "mindscapes" in Maruyama's (2001) terms, that are compatible with specific clusters of group level cultural characteristics and incompatible with others?

I wish I could tell you that this paper answers--or even addresses--all of these questions. In fact, it answers none of them, but it illustrates many as they relate to six Bosnian adolescent refugees living in upstate New York during the Fall of 2001.

The adolescents involved are part of a group of approximately 6,000 Bosnian refugees who have been resettled in the community since 1993. As such, they make up about 10% of the local population.

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[1] This paper was prepared for presentation at the 111th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, CA, August 9, 2003. Dr. Ginsberg and Ms. Lemire are grateful to Dr. Christel Woodward for presenting the paper in our absense. Comments or questions should be addressed to Pauline E. Ginsberg, Ph.D. Utica College, 1600 Burrstone Rd., Utica, NY 13502 or via email pginsberg@utica.edu.

Their resettlement was facilitated by a local agency that has, in total, resettled more than 10,000 refugees since 1975. Thus, in terms of host culture attributes (See Berry, 2003, p.30), the adolescents in this group have come to a small town of considerable diversity with an experienced social agency to assist in their adaptation at a very practical level. Overall, their families' arrival has been an economic boon since they brought a variety of skills including many in the construction trades, a strong work ethic, and a cultural history of pride in their homes (Coughlan and Owens-Manley, 2000) to a community with declining housing stock. Nevertheless, their reception has been a mixed one. Non-refugee minority groups have been resentful of the special services, particularly job placement, refugees received in a local economy that never really recovered from the recession before last. The schools have found it difficult to provide English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services for so many. Health care providers have had difficulty finding (and funding) translation services. Overall, however, Bosnian newcomers are fitting ever more seamlessly into the community as their language skills increase.

Method

As for the adolescents themselves, six were interviewed, three boys and three girls, two of whom were siblings. They ranged in age from 15-17 were and selected on the basis of age, gender, and facility in English from among Bosnian refugee families whose parent generation had participated in a previous study (Coughlan and Owens-Manley, 2000). A semi-structured interview schedule lasting 45-90 minutes, depending upon the expressiveness of the interviewee, was adapted in part from Van Hoorn, Lomlosi, Suchar, and Samelson (2000).

All interviewees were born in Bosnia and had been in the US for 3-7 years. All were enrolled in public school in grades 9-12. One came directly form Bosnia to upstate New York; four came by way of refugee camps in Slovenia or Croatia, and one came via another country. All emigrated with members of their nuclear family. Most had extended family in the U.S., some in the same community.

Interviews were conducted in English by the authors in the homes of the adolescents. Their responses were recorded by hand. Frequently at least one parent was present. Although he or she generally apologized for not knowing English, it was clear from facial expressions that parents understood at least part of the conversation.

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[2] See, for example,Berry (2003), Trimble (2003), and Zane and Mak (2003) for further information about the history of this debate and its implications for measurement.

Because of the small number of respondents, no statistical analysis by age, birth order, gender or length of time in the US could be carried out. Nor, in order to protect the identity of the respondents, could qualitative analysis make much note of these variables. Nevertheless, the six adolescents provide a wealth of information that can offer tentative insights into the specific refugee group of interest, serve as an ethnographic basis for further hypothesis generation and elucidate the findings of previous researchers.

Results

Results were organized into two sections. The first brief section, *Transitions*, includes refugee camp experience and travel to the U.S. The second, larger section, *In the United States*, includes information about home, school, peers, family, self, and, finally, wishes, fears and dreams for the future.

Transitions

In only two cases was resettlement discussed with the interviewee prior to departure from Europe, but, in one of those, the interviewee didn't listen because of reluctance to leave friends in the refugee camp. And, indeed, loss through separation was a common theme. Yet, all four interviewees with refugee camp experience reported positive memories of it. One said:

> It was fun. There were no jobs, no school; everything was provided. There were dances and soccer games--no worries. I didn't want to go back home.

When asked whether parents also enjoyed the experience, the respondent said she/he believed they did. A listening parent's facial expression indicated profound disagreement, but the parent did not comment. Unlike their parents in Coughlan and Owens-Manley's (2000) study, however, these interviewees never mentioned loss of friends and relatives in war as part of their experience.

The most salient part of the move itself was the airplane ride. Those who enjoyed it said it was "like a vacation" or that they were happy to be "going someplace bigger and better," while others feared, and continue to fear, flying, associating it with loss of familiar people and places.

In the United States

Asked about the biggest changes in their lives upon arrival in the US, other than the obvious geographic ones and, for those who came from tented camps, the shift to permanent housing, language (4 respondents), school (3 respondents), people (3 respondents) and differences in material goods--e.g., clothing and cars (2 respondents) were nominated spontaneously. One individual noted that there were different jobs and, indeed, only three of the total of 10 parents were engaged in the same kind of work in the U.S. as they had done in Bosnia.

Home. Upon arrival in upstate New York, interviewees found their housing comfortable and well-equipped. One interviewee characterized the family's rental housing as "elegant." Some remained in rental housing, but others families had bought homes. Their homes and the way that their parents remodeled and decorated them were a source of pride for the teens and it was apparent to the interviewers as well that their homes were decorated and maintained with care.

School. All interviewees valued education and expected, at minimum, to complete high school. Yet all found school difficult at first. For those who had been in refugee camps and were, therefore, out of school or receiving only minimal instruction, returning to the classroom itself was challenging. All six recalled problems due to language. In the words of one,

> The kids were talking. I thought they were talking about me at first; then, I saw they weren't.

As this statement suggests, once English was improved or mastered, they felt more included and began to feel comfortable. Said one, "I don't feel any different from, *like*, normal Americans"(emphasis added).

In middle school they were in ESOL or sheltered classes[1], moving to regular classrooms as their English improved. Those who had since gone on to high school generally recalled middle school as having a greater sense of community than high school which, by contrast, most found clique-ish and marred by ethnocentrism and racism. Some recounted being the target of ethnic slurs in the high school, something they did not experience as middle school students:

> People judge us because we are all Bosnians. (They think) we stink or are dirty.

For some, as with many U.S. teens, grades dropped with the transition to high school; there was difficulty making new friends. For a time, some engaged in anti-social behavior in order to fit in. One, having initially tried to conform to peers perceived as popular in order to avoid being a target, later made it a point to confront racism and ethnocentrism among fellow-students whether directed towards Bosnians or others.

Whereas in middle school, two interviewees turned to counselors and/or teachers for advice and assistance when something was troubling them, none of the high school students used these resources. Whether this reflects the age of the individuals or the atmosphere of the school is unknown since, although interviewees attended two different middle schools, all were enrolled at the same large urban high school. Despite no longer seeking out teachers or counselors, however, one interviewee expressed pride and

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[1] Sheltered classes in this community are those in which the language of instruction is English, but class size is reduced and teachers take particular care to make certain that students understand the language of textbooks and lectures.

pleasure in receiving praise for academic achievement from high school faculty. At the time of the interviews (Nov.-Dec., 2001), all interviewees reported doing well academically.

Peers. There was no uniformity among the interviewees in their peer relationships. One socialized only with non-Bosnians. A second had a mixed group of friends that was predominantly non-Bosnian, while a third, also having a mixed group of friends, reported that they were mostly Bosnian. Another had a large, mixed circle of friends at school, but at home socialized only with fellow Bosnians. A fifth socialized exclusively with Bosnians. While the sixth socialized only with extended family and complained of loneliness.

While some of these peer group differences surely reflect differences in the length of time individuals have been in the US, they also reflect individual differences in ethnocentrism among the interviewees themselves. For example, while two interviewees indicated that they found U.S. ethnic variety positive from the beginning ("I liked all the different people here."), others reported fear of or dislike for those who are ethnically different. Two specifically reported fear of "black people" whom they had never seen before coming to America. One of them later had African American friends. The other emphatically did not.

The teens' parents generally approved of their friends. Four reported that their parents provided guidelines regarding peer relationships or formerly did so when the interviewee was younger. These guidelines included prohibition of alcohol, cigarettes, or other drugs, the need to tell parents where they were going and when they would return, and for a girl, guidelines also included a curfew and permission to go out only with girlfriends or mixed groups.

Four who interacted often with friends reported that they saw their friends as very similar to themselves. Activities with friends included karate classes, school events, watching tv and videos, playing soccer or tennis, going to the mall, playing video games and cards, talking, listening to music, singing and dancing. One (older) went to bars and clubs with older friends while another (younger) complained, "(This community) is very boring. (There are) not many places for young kids like me to go out..." Specifically, this individual missed the street life of Europe and its clubs for young people.

Family. Asked about changes in their families since coming to the U.S., one interviewee acknowledged,

> (I) don't understand parents. (I'm) not an adult. (But it's) harder for them to learn English. They all had their lives <u>there</u>. I was (young) when I left.

Another noted that parents did not have as much social life as they had in Europe and grandparents were particularly limited by lack of English language. One interviewee noted that parents had changed less than children, saying, "They don't want to change." Another said, "We don't talk about it."

As this suggests, not only do families differ, but most interviewees noticed individual differences in ease of adaptation within their families. Although generally, the older the family member was, the harder it was for him or her to adapt, there were also within generation differences and cross-generational influences noted. One adolescent reported that his/her parents adapted easily and attributed that to prior experience with travel. The same person indicated that parents' easy adaptation made it easier for the respondent. A second reported initial difficulty quickly overcome by the entire family. In that family, parents "picked up and worked hard. Things just worked out." At the opposite end of the spectrum, a teen who referred to his/her own adaptation as difficult, indicated that, for parents it was extremely difficult. Another said that it was hard for father and even harder for mother while it was neither hard nor easy for him/herself. Another who said the change was easier for father than for mother who knows no English and doesn't want to learn found adapting easy for self and siblings. Yet another reported the opposite parental pattern with adaptation easier for mother than father and very easy for him/herself. Some individuals noted that siblings who came to the US when they were in elementary school had the easiest time of all, becoming more Americanized. Indeed, noted one, young children in the extended family had become so accustomed to America that "If they went back to Bosnia, they wouldn't know how to act." By contrast, older siblings or cousins were referred to who had not completed high school because the adjustment was too difficult.[4] One person indicated that extended family members were having a very difficult time until their own nuclear family arrived and helped their predecessors get involved in the community.

Overall, the interviewees characterized their family relationships as good, some including the extended family in their description. . "(We) have fun being family," said one. Some are closer to one parent than another; only one reported sibling squabbles. In two families, perceived unfairness in allocation of household chores and a time when the adolescent was not doing well in school were the sources of difficulty. Interviewees characterized these problems as minor. An interviewee stated with a smile that parents are generally flexible, but have final authority: "When I have disagreements (with them), I usually lose." By contrast, three (1/2) of the respondents reported total lack of conflict within the family circle.

Half have no specific household responsibilities, one noting, "I think I am what they call 'spoiled'." For those who have assigned tasks, they include babysitting for extended family members, picking up after

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[4]While this may be related to age, birth order, and developmental process, it is more likely linked to the time that it takes to become proficient in a new language. Non-English speaking adolescents who enter the American classroom after middle school lack the three years generally considered necessary for language mastery prior to graduation of their age-mates (Spring-Wallace, 2001).

themselves, cooking and cleaning--characterized with pride as "things girls have to learn to do." Others simply help out as needed.

Self. The adolescents perceive their own values to be very similar to those of both their parents and their peers. Asked what they valued most, four of the six listed family, two listed friends, three listed education or school, one listed a team, one a job and money, one having fun, and one said, "I never think about it." Commenting on the similarity of these values with their parents' values, one emphasized the family; another praised his/her father's advice. Still another, stressing the value of education indicated that, although parents aren't aware of it, even among peers, conversation is focused on school.

Notable by its absence was any reference to religion. Asked specifically about their religious beliefs and practices, four indicated that they were uninvolved in religion. One engaged in some Islamic practices without attending worship services and another sometimes dropped in at a Christian center near school to relax and talk with friends but did not attend services.

Five of the six interviewees believed that their parents understood their point of view. The sixth did not answer. Only one interviewee believed that parents had very different values from the children in the family. Parents, that interviewee noted, were concerned about life, safety, hard work, and what others think of the family, while teenagers in the family concentrated upon their own future success.

Four of the six believed that their lives were better than the lives of their parents because, "We have more opportunities," "(We) get to learn more stuff," and "I don't think we will have to go through a war." One, believing life would be similar to that of parents, said, "(They are) both hard working and do a good job; I hope to be like them."

Although four interviewees stated that their personalities had not changed as a result of their coming to the US, one indicated that "Now I am more brave" than before while another said,

> I didn't want to change, but, through time, I do. I don't have a choice.
> I learned English without translation.[5]

Wishes, dreams, and fears for the future. Looking toward the future, four interviewees believed their lives would continue to get better. Four expected to attend college or university, but only one of those had a specific career goal. The two who did not indicate an intention to pursue education beyond high school, by contrast, both had specific career goals. Most believed their parents would support their career choices, whatever those might be, and, in two cases where a parent was present, that was indeed the case. In two

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[5] Though many current theorists dismiss the Sapir-Whorf (Whorf, 1956, orig. 1940) hypothesis, the insight of this particular interviewee suggests that the connection between language and acculturative status is more complex than conceptualizing language purely as a prerequisite tool.

others, however, parents had definite opinions regarding which of several job possibilities their children were considering were acceptable and which were not.

The teens generally believed that if they had children, their children's lives would be similar to or better than their own. "(Children) won't have to go through all we went through, but I want to teach them not to be spoiled and think material things are more important than family," said one. Another said, "I'll teach them how to be an American."

Of four who said there were aspects of their lives that were better before they came to America, one missed the weather, another missed having cousins around, and two missed the closeness of the refugee camps where "We used to watch out for each other and take care of each other" and where people were not so materialistic:

> Bosnians who have been here a long time forget. (They) don't appreciate (what they have and) need to remember to treat people better.
>
> and
>
> Kids in school care way too much about their clothes.

When they were bothered by something, one respondent told nobody; others talked with friends of their own age (4), older friends (2), parents (4), siblings (3) and members of the extended family (1). Those now in high school who talked with teachers and/or counselors at the middle school, no longer did so. One who talked mainly to family members did so because, "They understand me better." Another said, "Friends are good, ... family is always there."

Asked to list three fears and three wishes, the most common fear was war (3). "I lived through it. It scared me. I still have that in me. I have dreams," said one. Second was guns (2). Other fears each listed by one person were snakes, spiders, the dark, crime as it is shown on television, and not finding happiness in the form of marriage, children, and being poor. One person, a male, indicated that he had no fears.

Paralleling their fears, the most common wish was for peace (3) tied with a return to Bosnia to visit (3). In the latter case, the term "visit" was emphasized. Two wished to finish school. Several individuals wished for varied means of increasing closeness to family and friends. One mourned the loss of a family member to accidental death and wished it hadn't happened. Another hoped for a new baby in the family. Another, that geographically distant family members lived nearby. One wished "to keep all friends and family forever." A castle, lots of money, a good life, happiness, a good future, and "not to have any problems like going to jail" were also among the adolescents' wishes.

Discussion

Despite the small sample size having precluded analyses on the basis of age, including age at immigration, gender, and length of time in the US found to be important by previous researchers (e.g., Hurenczyk and Tater, 1998; Knafo and Schwartz, 2001; Markowitz, 1994; Phinney, et al., 2000), the data from this study support continued inclusion of these variables in larger studies where sample size does not prevent statistical analysis or expose the identity of respondents. It also suggests that birth order is likely to be a variable of interest particularly as family dynamics are considered as a mediating variable in adolescent adjustment (c.f., Berger, 1997; Masten, 2001). Owens-Manley (2002, personal communication) also indicates that immigration wave may also be influential though it would be difficult to separate that from ethnic group size (Berry, 2003).

One exception to lack of generalizability of these small-sample data, however, is the marked difference in expressiveness between male and female interviewees. Although the sample as a whole may have been biased toward openness, sociability and gregariousness since both parents and teen agreed to the interview, within the sample, females were far more introspective, expressive and interested in both the interview and the work of the researchers. In fact, two of the three turned the tables and interviewed us at the end of our meeting, asking about the first author's work and the second author's personal life and academic major! Although male researchers might have elicited more information from male respondents, the gender difference in responsiveness was so great it seems unlikely to have been totally reversed by a gender difference in researchers. It may, rather, reflect a cultural gender difference also shared by American teens.

Another, less robust, exception is the age of immigration. Although within the sample, age differences are unanalyzable, respondent reports regarding siblings and extended family members indicate, as expected, that the younger the child, the easier was his/her adaptation to a new environment. Individuals who arrived in late middle adolescence to late adolescence tended to have difficulty remaining in school. This is consistent with the experience of school personnel (Spring-Wallace, 2001).

The importance of family coping style (c.f., Aronowitz, 1984; Berger,1997; Masten, 2001) was reinforced by this study. It is worth pointing out that even some of the interviewees were sensitive to the influence of their parents' adjustment on their own. Moreover, given the importance of extended family, this study also suggests that research in the area of family coping styles be extended beyond the nuclear family. Support for this assertion comes from the interviewee who spoke of earlier-arriving extended

family members who only became involved in the community with the arrival the interviewee's nuclear family. In this regard it is important to attend to the fact that within the family, the effect of children's adaptation upon parents and that of parents' upon children is reciprocal (See Santisteban and Mitrani, 2003).

Although young people generally recognized that their adaptation to American culture was easier than that of their elders, there was, as yet, little to no evidence of a generation gap like that identified by Knafo and Schwartz (2001) or cited by Chun and Akutusu (2003). This was the case although, like Knafo and Schwartz' research participants, this group arrived in the US in late childhood or early adolescence. Rather, these findings are consistent with Markowitz's (1994) retrospective study showing family enmeshment. Yet, indications that younger siblings and extended family members were more acculturated than themselves and that, after longer residence, some were abandoning family values for more materialistic ones, suggests a need for longitudinal studies of refugee adjustment within the family context.

Baptiste (1999) identified loss of generational boundaries as an acculturative stressor. This substantuated Markowitz' (1994) findings although, for Baptiste, it was epitomized by children taking a parental role such as translating between parents and those outside the family and for Markowitz the boundary was crossed by such activities as children selecting college majors and spouses so as to live out their parents hopes and dreams. Among the Bosnian interviewees, loss of boundaries was not evident. Although teens did perform a translation function for parents in some instances, parental authority within the household seemed to be well maintained. In most cases, interviewees described parental behavior consistent with an authoritative parenting style and, indeed, in one family this was demonstrated during the interview. As a teen discussed career goals not approved by parents, parents responded with humor and willingness to discuss the topic further. In other families, parents whose facial expressions seemed to indicate disagreement with their children's point of view also seemed to regard it as important not to undermine adolescent perceptions nor to interrupt their children's interviews.

In only one household did parents seem to have abdicated authority. This was the same household in which, according to the interviewee, difficult topics were not discussed. Nevertheless, an area of concern in these data is the interviewees' scant reference to war and absence of within-family disagreement. These may indicate a tacit agreement among family members to keep secrets and maintain solidarity in the face of outsiders.

Baptiste (1999) also identified parental anxiety about losing children to the new culture as a source of acculturative stress. Interestingly enough, in the present study, one of the adolescent interviewees shared

this concern with regard to self and peers of Bosnian heritage. This individual was quoted earlier in the paper regarding loss of values, people who would not know how to behave if they were to return to Bosnia, and awareness that, upon becoming able to comprehend and speak English without translation, the self also changed. This suggests that acculturation may be an inevitable consequence of language facility. Whether this constitutes a stressor or not may be due to other factors.

Most of the interviewees could easily be placed in one of Bergen's (1997) acculturative categories with one eradicator, one clinger, one vascillator, and two integrators in the sample. Using Berry's (1970, 2003; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen, 1992; Berry, Trimble, and Olmedo, 1986) categorization scheme, there was one assimilator, one integrator, one marginal, and the other three were in a state of flux or, in La Framboise, Coleman, and Gerton's (1993) terms, they were alternators. It would be interesting to explore whether these approaches to acculturative pressure were similar to those of other family members. If so, one might expect less within-family stress. However, the discussion of one interviewee indicates that the categories are not particularly stable. If this person's evolutionary self-description, consistent with that of a clinger at first, then a vascillator, and, at present, an integrator, is typical, the categories are of little usefulness except as a snapshot of one point in time.

To return to question that introduced this paper, what do these six interviews offer? Certainly they suggest that acculturation is multi-modal, domain specific, more likely continuous than discrete and recursive rather than linear. Because of the small sample size and constricted age group, it is not possible to draw inferences about the relationship of acculturation to developmental stage, but it is notable that the individual showing the most self-exploration was engaging in thought consistent with Erikson's (1968) and Marcia's (1980) descriptions of psychological moritorium, a normal part of adolescent development necessary for adult identity achievement.

Is the process of acculturation invariant across individuals? Clearly it is not, even when they come from the same cultural group and are roughly the same age. Nor are the results of acculturation likely to be uniform. At the group level they share a language, a heritage, and (at least to some degree) an experience of war trauma. As refugees, they did not elect migration. But at the individual level, they differ in terms of degree of trauma, previous life experience including degree of urbanization, experience of travel, attitudes toward other ethnic groups, gender, intelligence, temperament, age at resettlement, family support, peer support, and school support. Inevitably, it is now time to say that more research is needed.

Recommendations

Specifically, this study points up the need for longitudinal research as well as an expanded study with a larger sample size and inclusion of other communities and other refugee groups. Variables of particular interest are, as noted above: age, gender, length of time in the U.S., socio-historical factors connected with the wave of immigration involved, family coping styles, including that of the extended family, language facility, school characteristics, and the stability of acculturative patterns among adolescents.

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